

Chattanooga Times Free Press

Grants will help agencies provide legal representation

By Mike O'Neal
December 27, 2003

Parents with legal issues involving custody and visitation but without the money to hire attorneys will benefit from nine federal grants awarded statewide through the Tennessee Administrative Office of the Courts, officials said.

"The number of people using the court system without the benefit of legal counsel is increasing, not only in Tennessee but across the nation," said Connie Clark, administrative director of the courts.

Federal grants totaling \$280,186 are being distributed to a number of agencies across the state to improve access to justice for self-represented, or pro se, litigants. Agencies receiving the grants to fund their proposals include Legal Aid of East Tennessee and Southeast Tennessee Legal Services in Hamilton County. Proposals chosen for the grants include establishing pro se clinics, providing information about the courts, assistance with parenting plans, facilitating mediation, providing legal forms, sponsoring workshops for pro se litigants and making available attorney assistance, according to Sue Allison with the Administrative Office of the Courts.

Mrs. Allison said grant awards ranged from \$7,500 to \$54,070.

Legal Aid of East Tennessee was awarded \$47,000 to help establish pro se divorce clinics for its clients in 26 counties including Hamilton.

"We receive a huge volume of calls regarding divorces," said Debra House, the agency's associate director. "It is our most-requested service, but the one we are least able to respond to."

Ms. House said the agency's grant will be used to assist couples with children. She said "parents without resources" will have a program modeled on ones already in place in Knoxville and Johnson City, Tenn.

Southeast Tennessee Legal Services plans to use its \$22,000 grant to educate people about representing themselves in divorce cases, according to executive director Whitney Durand.

He said booklets and videos aimed at helping people litigate their own divorces will be made available to clients in Hamilton, Marion and Sequatchie counties.

"Family law, divorce in particular, has the largest demand for service," Mr. Durand said.

"Probably a third of the people that come to us cannot do it on their own, but this will help meet a tremendous legal need."